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ABSTRACT

A study examined recent developments in adult basic education (ABE) in Great Britain in relation to students with learning difficulties and issues about the ways in which programs seemed to be moving. Information was collected from ABE staff and students in case study sites in northwest England from the following sources: semistructured interviews and group/pair discussions; "ways of learning" day events; a residential weekend with workshops; case study scenarios, role play, and drawing; and a questionnaire to original open learning centers funded by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit and more established ABE providers across England and Wales. Findings indicated the referral practice appeared to be the way ABE was developing. Recent initiatives had created a spread of open learning approaches and "drop-in" facilities accompanied by the demise of small group sessions with a teacher/facilitator. "Preferred types" of students were emerging. The demise of group learning was accompanied by a rise in individualized learning. Policy statements, professional staff, and institutional arrangements operated in conjunction to label the "normal" ABE student and the "other" student with learning difficulties. A more negative perception of adult students with learning difficulties existed, leading to negative definitions and labelling. Another trend was the pressure to demonstrate achievement in particular, specified ways. This would have powerful effects on people with learning difficulties. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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Sue Bergin and Andy Johnson

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Background

The issues and findings discussed in this paper are the result of a collaborative research project between Lancaster University and Goldsmiths' College in London. The *Open learning in adult basic education* research project was funded by the Universities Funding Council, now the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFC), between September 1991 and September 1993.

The initial motivation for the research came from wanting to know if and how recent developments in adult basic education (ABE) nationally had influenced provision. This paper discusses some of these changes in relation to students with learning difficulties and also raises some issues about the ways in which provision seems to be moving.

The discussions in this paper focus on information from ABE staff and students in three case study sites in the northwest of England. Each site included at least one basic skills open learning centre and a more established ABE setting. Over the course of the project, we worked with 92 students and 32 staff (both paid and volunteer) across the three sites.

We had a commitment to working with students and staff in ways that encouraged participation and involvement as far and as much as people wanted. In other words, we wanted to create research opportunities in which people involved in basic education could explore and reflect on their experiences and, through the research, have their voices heard by a wider audience. Research

participants also had control over whether and how we used their words in our writings and whether they used their real name or a self-chosen pseudonym.

In terms of research methodologies, we tried to combine some practices from teaching with research. As well as semi-structured interviews and group/pair discussions, which were particularly effective for working in-depth with people, we facilitated 'ways of learning' day events and a residential weekend with workshops. We also used case study scenarios, role-play and drawing as ways of exploring people's ideas and experiences of their learning history, learning styles and thoughts on the ABE provision they attended. In addition, we sent a questionnaire to all the original Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit (ALBSU) funded open learning centres, and to a matching sample of more established ABE providers across England and Wales. The questionnaire thus gave us a broad picture of events and practices across a wide range of ABE providers.

Introduction – what is meant by basic skills?

At an adult basic education staff development day at Lancaster University we asked tutors to offer a definition of basic skills. This request was treated with some amusement: it was agreed that 'basic skills' means different things to different people and also changes with time and circumstance. Asking for one definition was seen as an impossible, almost meaningless, request.

Tutors questioned the relevance of attempting to establish a once-and-for-all definition. Policy-makers might have a need for such a definition, but for practitioners the need is less pressing. This is not to say that practitioners do not carry around working definitions in their minds – they do, but such definitions are more qualitative and practical. The basis for decision-making and action is context and people based rather than held as an abstracted and generalised definition of basic skills.

The Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit is the national agency for adult basic education (i.e. adult literacy, numeracy and related basic skills) in England and Wales. ALBSU's current definition of basic skills is:

> The ability to read, write and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general.
> (ALBSU 1992)

ALBSU's definition is abstracted from practice and the particular circumstances of individual students and learning environments, which the tutors referred to above also had to consider. That ALBSU provides a definition while practitioners are more reticent to do so points up a difference between the concerns and considerations of basic skills practice and policy-making. Nevertheless, while policy definitions might seem a million miles away from practice, there are links between policy and practice which connect and reinforce each other, and where there is basic agreement. This paper looks at the connections and differences between the definitions operating in policy and practice, and how these influence the learning opportunities made available for people with learning difficulties in adult basic education.

From the beginning of the officially supported and recognised literacy and numeracy campaigns in England and Wales in the 1970s, many providers held an essential defining philosophy that anyone who, as an adult, wanted to return to education to improve their basic skills should have the opportunity to do so. Many adults who return to learning have had negative experiences of compulsory school education or have missed substantial periods of schooling through illness, relocation or other factors. Open access has been an important feature of basic education, not least because, as ALBSU says:

> It's important that everyone who has had an unsuccessful and frustrating experience in education is able to see that it need not always be that way.
> (ALBSU 1992)

Open access was a distinctive feature of early basic educational provision; the system was new and growing. Freedom of access brought with it locally defined basic skills provision. The territorial boundaries and competition with other education systems and providers which have taken place

increasingly in the 1980s and 1990s had yet to happen.

This is not to suggest that the early days of basic education were some kind of perfect 'good old days'. No doubt for some people they could equally be described as the 'bad old days'. The fast-growing service might well have needed attention, might well have expanded naïvely and taken inappropriate referrals, and might well have been over-the-top in its enthusiastic openness to all. For instance, many people with learning difficulties might have found their literacy and numeracy needs being subsumed as providers operated primarily to relieve 'carers' for two hours a week rather than adequately address the needs of the students who came to them. Or volunteer and paid staff may have had inadequate training for work with people with learning difficulties, which meant that the provision offered was poor.

Whether the early days of the service are perceived as good or bad, what is clear now is that the current definition of basic skills is moving away from open access and creating a more selective provision. This means that, for some people, trying to get access to basic educational provision may repeat their earlier experiences and prove to be unsuccessful and frustrating. Indeed, for some people with learning difficulties, this seems to be what is happening. In this paper we will explore the impact of shifting definitions and practice for people with learning difficulties in adult basic education.

Referrals

In our national questionnaire (sent to all the original ALBSU funded open learning centres and to a matching sample of established ABE providers across England and Wales) respondents said they regularly referred students with learning difficulties to 'other providers'. The figures were 64 per cent (N=63) of open learning centres and 70 per cent (N=43) of established ABE providers referring students with learning difficulties to other providers. These included:

- life-skills courses,
- self-advocacy groups,
- disability and learning support courses,
- special needs provision within a local college of further education,
- pre-ABE tuition or vocationally-based tuition,
- the local adult training centre, or
- other provision which had scheduled sessions and was not organised on a 'drop-in' basis.

No doubt these other providers included basic skills as an integral part of the provision they offered, but it is important to recognise that this is segregated from what might be described as 'mainstream basic skills provision' available for other adult learners.

This is not to suggest that referral, particularly if it is to a provider more geared to meeting the needs of students with learning difficulties, is in itself a negative thing. What we want to explore is how definitions and practices can operate in ways which influence the educational opportunities that are made available for students with learning difficulties.

Referral seems to indicate that some kind of definition is currently being used by ABE practitioners, resulting in adults with learning difficulties being defined as 'other' than basic skills students and referred elsewhere within a locality.

It seems that the practice of referral finds encouragement and validation from ALBSU who stress that:

> basic skills does not include necessarily wider provision for adults and young people with special needs ... (ALBSU 1993a).

This proviso to the definition of basic skills is interesting because there is nothing inherent in the nature of basic education which means it cannot provide educational opportunities for adult students with learning difficulties or other special needs.

1988 saw the start of an ALBSU initiative which established a series of basic skills open learning

centres across England and Wales. These open learning centres were intended to:

> encourage authorities to provide centres with trained staff, computers and audio-visual equipment, where adults with literacy and numeracy problems can receive tuition, supplemented by self-study at home and by complementary face-to-face tuition.
> (ALBSU 1993a).

One of the aims of the newly established open learning centres was to increase learning opportunities within adult basic education. However, in spite of this intention and the potential of open learning, increased access for all groups does not seem to have happened, and many students with learning difficulties have been denied access to participate in these new learning opportunities.

A definition of basic skills work which promotes the idea that adult students with learning difficulties might have their needs better met elsewhere, in some other 'necessarily wider provision', may well be justifiable. But, while this notion holds sway, it obscures the need to look at why and how mainstream basic educational provision has not developed in ways which meet these needs.

The demise of small group learning

ALBSU acknowledges that:

> small groups are essential in basic skills work if students ... are to receive the appropriate amount of individual attention. If a group is too large students ... tend to 'drop-out' for lack of teacher support, often after making very little progress.
> (ALBSU 1992)

Recent initiatives have created a spread of open learning approaches and 'drop-in' facilities in ABE which, in many areas, has been accompanied by the demise of small group sessions with a teacher/facilitator. For example, in the view of one open learning centre tutor:

> 'It's virtually impossible, I would say it is impossible, for a one-tutor session to do any group work, or if it did happen, it would be to the disadvantage of the other students who were here at the same time'.
> (Tom, open learning centre tutor)

'Drop-in' and open learning facilities, whilst increasing access to education through being more flexible in terms of opening times, have a reverse effect too:

> 'By the nature of the way we operate, where people can come and go at any time, we do try to anticipate who's coming in, but you can never predict. So, some sessions are busier than others, but they don't necessarily stay that way throughout the year. So, if I said, "Well, we need to increase our staffing ratio on a Monday morning, bring in an extra member of staff," well, sod's law we'll find that the following Monday half a dozen people turn up.'
> (Nancy, open learning centre co-ordinator)

It also becomes much more difficult to maintain an appropriate ratio of teachers to students, and to organise volunteer staff. A teacher might one day be working with 20 students in the morning and just five in the afternoon. There is no way of knowing who might arrive or how long they might stay, and coping is very difficult:

> '... it's the fluctuations and tidal waves of coming and going; one person on her own wouldn't have been able to cope with the potential demand.'
> (Kath, open learning centre tutor)

As a tutor this means it is very difficult to decide who most needs your help and how to divide your time amongst the students. One tutor described such teaching as being like:

> '... doing that circus act of spinning the plates on top of the pole; an almost impossible task of trying to make sure everyone is doing okay and when they're likely to want help from you.'
> (Tom, open learning centre tutor)

Inevitably, some students get left out and don't

get the appropriate amount of individual attention they require from the tutor who's desperately buzzing around the room from one student to the next, trying to keep on top of things.

The rise of individualised learning and emerging 'preferred types'

Given such arrangements, it is hardly surprising that staff find their work more manageable with some students than with others. In this way 'preferred types' of students emerge – i.e those likely to be able to cope and do well in such a learning environment. For instance:

> 'A student needs to be very well-motivated for the open learning situation, and they have to be very self-disciplined ...'
> (Margaret, open learning centre tutor)

> 'The people that come [here] have to be able to work on their own.'
> (Chris, open learning centre administrator)

> '... those people who are able to move themselves on, with a certain amount of independence.'
> (Kath, open learning centre tutor)

> '... what it needs to come in here, and these are words I've used so many times, are motivation and commitment.'
> (Tom, open learning centre tutor)

> 'I find that most of my students are actually quite self-directed, but how that's happened I'm not really sure.'
> (Christine, open learning centre tutor)

The demands placed on students as a result of wildly fluctuating and often inappropriate staffing levels mean that they have to be able to work on their own, they have to feel confident in what they are doing, they have to be motivated and committed, they have to take responsibility for directing their own learning, and they have to know when and how to try to get tutor support – and be able to do this successfully, in competition with other students.

Much as tutors develop 'preferred types' of students who they feel will be able to work well in this sort of learning environment, many of the students we interviewed were also aware of the way they had to 'be' in order to work well with open learning/drop-in learning facilities. For instance:

> 'You've got to work at it, have an aim, you've got to want to do it – you've got to do it yourself, not sit back and let others do it for you.'
> (Cheryl, open learning centre student)

> 'You've got to be conscientious, getting your head down and into your work ...'
> (Vincent, open learning centre student)

> 'You've got to be self-motivated to open your book, you've got to know where you're going. I've got to think "I can do this" because a lot of the time there's only one teacher and other people have her attention – so when I go in there I just know I have to get on with it otherwise it's no use.'
> (Louise, open learning centre student)

The demise of group learning approaches in ABE and the spread of open learning/drop-in facilities have been accompanied by a rise in the cult of individualised learning. Needs which students might have in common are worked on separately, people are split off from each other and an individually negotiated learning programme is established. With an individualised learning programme, people might be working on the same or similar tasks (highly likely in fact given the limited resources available in any one centre), but rarely are they encouraged to work with other students, to share their knowledge and learning together. Group learning still happens, but is now increasingly geared to particular learning needs, as expressed by many students. It then becomes a cost- and time-effective move to get people together, to convene a group and explore these areas, rather than for a tutor to spend time with each individual looking at spelling strategies or study skills, for instance.

It is important to recognise that individualised learning can take people out of relationships, and can often amplify the difficulties faced in forming and maintaining relationships, and in using and

developing social skills. Individualised learning can be isolating and does little to address communication and interpersonal skills needs. When this happens – and it does – basic skills work becomes detached from its context, becomes detached from the relationships and interactions that are part of being able to live in society. Basic skills work becomes reduced to a series of purely functional skills (like how to write a formal letter, or fill in a variety of official forms) which are practised and demonstrated in the educational setting but are not related or transferable to the wider world. Basic skills become abstracted (rather like policy definitions) and hence devoid of practical and personal meanings. In addition, the individualisation of learning can mean an individualisation of difficulties. If the opportunity to meet and discuss basic skills with other students is missing, this can reinforce social stigma and self-blame.

With open learning, there is a danger that what Carl Rogers calls 'the interpersonal relationship in the facilitation of learning' will be neglected:

> ... interpersonal relationships are important, that we know something about releasing human potential, that we could learn much more, and that unless we give strong positive attention to the human interpersonal side of our educational dilemma, our civilisation is on its way down the drain. Better courses, better curricula, better coverage, better teaching machines will never resolve our dilemma in a basic way.
> (Rogers 1993)

Individualised learning creates difficulties when the development of communication skills is on the agenda, as in particular sections of some accreditation schemes. For instance, Level 1 of Wordpower (ALBSU/City & Guilds) necessitates being able to 'give information to a group of people through a short talk or presentation' and to 'support and reassure someone who is in an unfamiliar situation'. When certification requirements demand people have to talk together, some very strange mock-up conversations can be created in order to demonstrate such competences. Simulated situations come about when the real learning environment does not offer genuine and meaningful opportunities for people to converse with each other. Sometimes, specifically to fulfil competence criteria, group learning is again temporarily reinstated before returning to individualised learning approaches.

The move away from group work and interaction as an integral part of the learning process has been used as another justification for the referral of students with learning difficulties away from basic skills education. People with learning difficulties are often seen (by other people) as 'needing' to develop their communication and social skills. This, it is claimed, is better handled by some 'necessarily wider provision' (ALBSU 1993a). Basic education increasingly seems to be about some kind of narrower curriculum which does not see itself as being able to develop such skills areas. This apparently stilted curriculum combined with the move to individualised learning means that people with learning difficulties are seen as 'unsuitable' for certain learning environments and are referred elsewhere.

The power of labelling

An emerging 'preferred type' of student who is likely to be able to cope and do well in an open learning/drop-in learning environment soon develops and these characteristics become accepted almost as personality features or criteria against which an individual can be measured up for 'suitability'.

Initial interviews and assessments of potential students can be used as a method of screening, of making decisions about who is likely to 'do well' in a particular learning environment. Staff involved in making these decisions can act as front-line 'gatekeepers', controlling who gets access to basic skills education. In some open learning centres, for example, it is the administrative receptionist who makes the initial decisions on access:

> '... when people come in, I'm usually the first person they speak to ... they speak to me about what they want to do, and I suppose I judge from that if we're the right centre ... and I always think I've made the right decision, that if they can't read or write, I don't feel it's fair wasting their time and making an

appointment for [the co-ordinator] to see them.'
(Chris, open learning centre administrator)

Such decisions made about access to learning are impressionistic and are not grounded in educational theory or training, nor are they based on knowing that some students' needs will be better met by some other 'necessarily wider provision'. They appear to be based on the view that the constraints and practice within basic education mean that some students must of necessity be excluded. For many students with learning difficulties, the decision to drop-out for lack of teacher support never even arises as an issue; often they don't even get the opportunity to drop-in.

Sally Tomlinson (1982), in talking about children, documents how the historical development of special schools and the social construction of learning difficulties by 'the judgements of professionals ... including teachers, head teachers, educational psychologists, medical officers, and a variety of other people who may be involved' can create a stigma and a labelling for life. It seems that, years later, as adult students with learning difficulties, some people are caught up in this process of definition, labelling and decision-making again – this time in adult basic education.

Although the labelling process in basic education may not be as established and systematised as in primary education, it is clear that policy statements, professional staff and institutional arrangements seem to be operating in conjunction to construct the 'normal' ABE student and the 'other' student with learning difficulties. This is a relatively new development and is growing in its momentum. Its effect is to marginalise and exclude the 'others'.

Many areas operate referral/assessment systems, which seem to work partly as a way of controlling the numbers of students with learning difficulties involved in basic education so that, for example:

'... groups have not been swamped by students with learning difficulties, which on the one hand makes many demands on the tutor, and on the other hand – like it or not – has caused problems with the image of the group for other people coming in from outside.'
(Derek, basic education organiser)

It is quite disturbing that in basic education there is not the same concern about the image of being swamped by people wanting, for instance, to learn how to improve their spelling as there is with people with learning difficulties. Numbers of students with learning difficulties who are given access to basic education are closely monitored and only some students with learning difficulties are accepted. Their individual motivation, confidence, maturity, ability to work on their own and take responsibility for their own learning has to be clearly demonstrated if they are to get access to the open learning/drop-in facilities within adult basic education. Demonstrating these features is very difficult given the stigma that often comes with the label of learning difficulties.

The effect of the labelling of adults as having learning difficulties goes beyond being an account of the barriers to learning they might have and suggested ways of working to overcome these barriers. Once a person is brought to the attention of institutions and systems in this way it then becomes acceptable for any parts of their whole self to be scrutinised; they almost become public property. Decisions may cease to be educationally based and can become founded on far more personal judgements and beliefs. Aspects of a person's physical appearance, behaviour and personality are brought in, and these can then be used to reinforce the labelling and the decisions which have been made:

'I think it depends on how they present themselves, because I think, to a certain extent, that if your special needs stand out in such a way that they attract the attention of other members, I think that might possibly create some sort of difficulty, because some special needs people can be very demanding and therefore demand the attention of the tutor constantly. And I think this can be an irritant to the tutor because the tutor becomes aware that he or she is spending a disproportionate amount of time with this person and there are other people in the background whose needs are not being met. So I mean that kind of special needs person is not the most suitable to be in a workshop and could create difficulties.'
(Gail, basic education tutor)

This again raises the issue of what is being defined here, of how fluid definitions can be, and of who gets access to basic skills education. It seems that some adult students with learning difficulties are seen as suitable and others not. Some students with learning difficulties are 'defined-in' to basic education, i.e. are labelled in ways which mean they can be included in the provision, while others are 'defined-out' and then referred elsewhere to a 'necessarily wider provision'. It seems the definitions and labels shift.

Adult students with learning difficulties are rarely given positive categorising labels, which other students in basic education are. Rarely are they described or perceived, for instance, as being 'self-motivated', 'independent', or 'committed' and rarely are these behaviours expected or encouraged of people with learning difficulties. Instead, a more negative perception exists, leading to negative definitions and labelling. For example:

> 'It's people who are quite loud, and attention-seeking, and maybe their behaviour seems slightly odd to an observer, an outsider ... '
> (Nancy, open learning centre co-ordinator)

Concern for how other people might respond often means that adult students with learning difficulties are excluded from basic education provision. In one of the centres we made an initial visit to, such a concern led to distinctions being made between people with learning difficulties and people with mental health problems. The argument put forward was that people with mental health problems were often quiet and subdued whereas people with learning difficulties were often noisy. This dubious logic led to a more general acceptance within the centre of people with mental health problems than those with learning difficulties.

The problem is that this process of labelling and defining has very little to do with a person's basic skills needs and much more to do with making selective and private judgements about a person's suitability. Powerful decisions are made about people's behaviour and way of being and how they will or will not fit in to the culture of the learning environment that has been created. Anyone who doesn't fit in may be referred elsewhere.

Sometimes, people 'slip through' and are then perceived as a problem within the learning setting. For example:

> 'There are one or two people who are so demanding of tutor time that they, well, they need counselling about it, and they need some kind of behaviour modification of what they're doing and I think that we just have to keep working on that. If it becomes a problem where it's causing disruption in a number of sessions I would then, as I have done, restrict the number of sessions that that person can come to, for the general good.'
> (Nancy, open learning centre co-ordinator)

The pressure to achieve

Another trend in basic education in recent years is the pressure to demonstrate achievement in particular, specified ways. This has powerful effects on people with learning difficulties.

Educational achievements, by both students and staff, have today been transposed into a standardised industrial-speak. We now measure the quality and effectiveness of educational provision in terms of performance indicators and outcomes. ALBSU awards kite marks to providers who meet their quality standards for basic skills programmes. Quality is defined by ALBSU, which marks out good and bad practice, influencing the way provision grows and develops. Previously, achievements were monitored, assessed and documented locally in ways which allowed for such varied outcomes as gains in confidence or obtaining a certificate to be recognised.

ALBSU has devised a basic skills accreditation initiative (BSAI) which is made up of:

> ... the competences needed to be an effective communicator in our society, and have been revised to include the essential underpinnings and knowledge.
> (ALBSU 1993b)

These competences are accredited via the ALBSU/ City & Guilds Wordpower and Numberpower

certificates of basic education. The accreditation stages of these certificates 'have also been mapped against the English and mathematics national curriculum' (ALBSU 1993b). Recently, ALBSU sponsored a local development project to produce assessment screening to measure students against Wordpower and Numberpower standards. Already, students in many colleges of further education are screened against these criteria.

Achievement in basic education is now becoming increasingly channelled into standardised and apparently measurable outcomes in the form of such competences and their accompanying methods of certification. For illustration, the following two competence statements come from the foundation level of Wordpower and Numberpower:

- write short, simple notes or letters conveying up to two separate ideas;

- measure lengths using metric and imperial units.

Many practitioners regret the narrowing effect this competence-based accreditation is having on basic educational provision and curriculum, arguing – as Julia Clarke does – that:

> the dynamic processes of literacy and communication skills cannot be reduced to a simple set of functions.
> (Clarke 1993)

Standardised accreditation measures students' abilities in relation to each other. It does not take account of different starting points or of an individual's gain in performance or achievement. In this way, such accreditation lacks student-centredness. Basic skills have not only been defined but broken up into units by Wordpower and Numberpower administrators. This modularisation of learning is increasingly common throughout the education system. Trying to break up an activity like literacy and then measure the success rates of people is an artificial process which moves away from the fact that:

> Basic education has, perhaps uniquely, sought to respond to the needs of the individual and the individual within the community ... students fulfil their diverse needs and develop a variety of skills over a protracted timescale and their focus may not be the same as the measurable achievements [of a certificated learning programme]
> (Kibble 1993)

In terms of teaching, national certification encourages tutors to teach students to perform, to achieve at the required level. Tutors do not want students to 'fail' and so they teach to the competences, narrowing the learning process. Learning beyond these competences is seen as 'other'; it is viewed as secondary to the learning necessary to achieve a particular competence at a particular level for a particular certificate. Learning activities become narrowly focused in order to achieve this objective. Thus learning becomes mis-shapen and forced into particular functional categories or competences which can then be accredited.

The rhetoric of funders describes education/training as part of an on-going process – as lifelong, continual learning. However, the accompanying pressure to document and account for learning in particular ways and in a particular timespan results in a less natural process which does not allow people to pursue their needs and interests when and how they determine. Instead, these parameters are specified by the holders of the purse-strings.

Part of this trend can be dramatically seen in the move towards outcome-related funding (ORF). ORF is becoming increasingly commonplace in basic education, as much provision has moved from being part of a local authority funded service into the more competitive realm of the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and local colleges. Often, external funders (e.g. the local Training and Enterprise Council (TEC)) will set particular quantitative targets/outcomes to be achieved in order to secure future funding. When this happens, the channelling and narrowing of the learning process becomes even more acute. For example, if funders require that students pass foundation level of Wordpower or Numberpower within a certain timespan as a measure of a positive outcome on which future funding rests, then the pressure is on staff and students to achieve this, and only this.

When outcome-related funding exists, there is competition and the system can be manipulated to secure future funding. For instance, there has been concern amongst some tutors that there is a 'tendency to enter students at a lower level than their ability in order to ensure positive outcomes for funding purposes' (Kibble 1993). This raises questions about the appropriateness of such certification in meeting the needs of students, and of the divide between new learning and the rehearsal of already acquired skills.

When ORF operates, the needs of particular groups of students may become subsumed under the pressure to achieve the required outcomes. Some people with learning difficulties will be seen as unlikely to achieve the required outcome in the required timespan – e.g. to pass foundation level of Wordpower in 12 weeks. This perception, coupled with the pressure to achieve the demanded outcome, makes it likely that their needs will become subsumed, while the student who is seen as likely to achieve the required outcome will be the focus of teacher attention to ensure their success. In this way, outcome-related funding can reinforce divisions and split students into those who are working towards a certificate and those who are not. This in turn may affect the usefulness of the teaching and learning opportunities available, particularly for some students with learning difficulties in basic education.

The Child Support Agency has acknowledged that their need to meet target outcomes has led to a focus on easy options – parents who are relatively easy to trace and get maintenance payments from. The same narrowing seems to be happening in education with ORF. 'Easy option' students with short-term learning goals and the ability to obtain certificates become the focus, so that outcome targets can be met. Students with longer-term needs or with more diverse learning interests become sidelined. Genuine student-centred learning diminishes and institution-led learning takes over when students' needs do not match up with the needs of the institution to meet its target outcomes. There is an increasing concern in further education that 'colleges will select those learners who are less expensive to support, are most likely to achieve accreditation and enhance the image of the institution' (Dee and Corbett 1994).

Conclusions

> The continuing education of adults, particularly those with special needs, is vulnerable to frequent changes in policy, organisation and provision.
> (Dee 1987)

The current trends in policy and practice seem to be a move towards a more narrowly defined adult basic education student and curriculum. Part of this policy re-definition and the accompanying shifts in practice have resulted in some people with learning difficulties being increasingly likely to be excluded from ABE, or to have their needs subsumed and largely unmet.

Within ABE there appears to be a series of factors operating in conjunction to limit access to learning opportunities for adults with learning difficulties. These factors include:

- the created culture and organisation of the learning environment;
- the perceptions of the dominant/majority users;
- the personal (and powerful) judgements of staff;
- the current official definition of basic skills;
- the institutional need to achieve the demands of outcome-related funding.

It is important to recognise that these factors are not inherent to the nature of basic education or of open learning. They have much more to do with the development of current national and local educational policies and practices. Together, these factors can be used to build up a powerful justification for the referral of adult students with learning difficulties to what ALBSU describes as other 'necessarily wider provision' (ALBSU 1993a). Referral seems to be happening more as a result of this constellation of factors and less as a result of an effective, genuine system of assessment of the basic skills needs of students with learning difficulties.

This referral practice appears to be the way adult basic education is developing. However, there

are other options and other ways of working which do not create a selective provision for adults with basic skills needs.

Integration can occur in an open learning environment. For example, at Carlisle College, the independent learning centre is used by all full- and part-time students at the College. This means that ABE students, with or without learning difficulties, have the same freedom to use the centre as any other students. Adult basic education students may be working in the centre at the same time as students on degree courses. If these groups can work successfully in conjunction with each other then there seems to be no reason why different groups of students within ABE cannot also work together in a centre.

The Carlisle College centre, unlike many open learning centres, uses volunteer tutors creatively and freely to allow students to make flexible arrangements and choices about the support they might need in their learning. Volunteer/student partnerships develop and it is the partners who decide if and how they need the paid tutor's support.

It is important that students with learning difficulties have their views and feelings sought and respected, particularly in the formation of learning programmes. Too often this does not happen. Instead, the process is carried out in ways which are hurried and pre-defined by tutors and their organisations, and which results in learning programmes that are more tutor-led than negotiated. Often students feel powerless in this situation, resulting in compliance and feeling grateful for any support offered in their learning.

The process of assessment and definition of learning goals can be empowering and encouraging if it can be recognised that learning goes beyond ameliorating powerlessness through the acquisition of skills:

> The skills of reading, writing and counting are not an end in themselves, rather they are the essential means for the achievement of a fuller and more creative life.
> (UNESCO 1947)

These means can be made accessible for all. Basic education can accommodate a diversity of people; it does not have to develop in ways that marginalise some students with learning difficulties.

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